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English classes can't meet demand

Iraqi refugees struggle to find necessary lessons

By [Anne Krueger](#), UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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Howard Lipin / UNION-TRIBUNE

Entesar Essa of El Cajon is learning English at Cuyamaca College. Twenty-seven of the 29 students in her reading class are Iraqi, and the college is having a hard time keeping up with demand.



Photo by Howard Lipin

Guillermo Colls (right) leads a reading class for English learners at Cuyamaca College in Rancho San Diego. Most of the students in the class are Iraqi. East County has a large population of Iraqi refugees, with more arriving each month.



Photo by Howard Lipin

Rofael Raghad of El Cajon attends an English class at Cuyamaca College. High demand for such courses in East County means some prospective students will be turned away.

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

What: Training for volunteers interested in teaching English-language classes to immigrants

When: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. May 1 and May 8

Where: Church of St. Luke, 1980 Hillsdale Road, El Cajon

Information: Charles Ross, (619) 442-1481 or intgallery@aol.com

English classes in demand at high school level, too

While Iraqi immigrants have filled adult classes teaching English as a second language, so have their children placed pressure on East County high school ESL classes.

The Grossmont Union High School District had 465 students from other countries in the last school year, with about 40 percent speaking Arabic or Chaldean as their native language, said Erin Richison, director of the district's English-learner program.

The students are tested to determine their English proficiency. Many arrive with gaps in their education during the years they waited in limbo in countries such as Syria or Jordan. Special instruction has been set up to teach them English while they are taking other classes.

Richison said several high schools in the district will be offering additional English-language classes for beginners. Planning for the classes is difficult because the federal government isn't notifying district officials on how many new immigrants to expect, Richison said.

She said the Iraqi students' families encourage them to learn English and get an education.

"All of these students are extremely eager and motivated," Richison said. "They want to be there every day. They're anxious to pick up the English language. They try really hard."

ANNE KRUEGER

EAST COUNTY — The hundreds of Iraqis arriving in San Diego County each month face a frustrating problem as they try to create a future here.

They need to learn English to get a job and to keep their welfare benefits until they find work, but English classes

have been overwhelmed and unable to provide spaces for many.

Saif Matti, 29, who arrived in El Cajon six months ago, recently stood in line to register for an English-language class at the El Cajon Adult School at El Cajon Valley High School. Matti said he hasn't been able to find work and struggles to find the classes he needs to learn English.

"All the classes are full," he said. "Every school is full, full, full."

The United States began allowing Iraqi refugees to resettle in this country in 2006, and the numbers exploded from 202 that year to 18,838 in 2009. San Diego County, with its established Iraqi community, has taken in more recent refugees than anywhere else in the United States.

About one in four Iraqi refugees arriving in the U.S. comes to San Diego County, according to a March study by San Diego State University demographer John Weeks.

About 17,000 people of Iraqi descent lived in San Diego County as of October 2008. According to Weeks' study, an additional 6,400 Iraqis had arrived since then, or about 400 a month, a rate that is expected to continue for at least two or three more years.

Most come to East County, which is home to many Iraqis who arrived decades ago, two Chaldean Catholic churches and more affordable apartments. Those who have recently arrived are finding few jobs available in a down economy — especially if they don't speak English. As many as 80 percent of the non-English speakers are unemployed, Weeks said.

Without jobs, the new arrivals apply for welfare, which offers \$862 a month for a family of four and \$359 a month for a single person. To keep receiving government money, they must spend 35 hours a week looking for work, taking English classes or doing other things to improve their job skills. Couples are allowed to divide the 35 hours between them.

The demand for English-language classes has swelled attendance in the programs around East County and has led to a shortage of classes at cash-strapped schools.

"It's terrible to have to turn them away," said Alicia Muñoz, the coordinator of the English as a Second Language program at Cuyamaca College in Rancho San Diego. "They are hungry to learn. It's really heartbreaking."

The Grossmont Union High School District provides free English-language classes for more than 3,000 students — about 85 percent of them from Iraq, said Robyn Wiggins, ESL principal of the El Cajon Adult School.

Wiggins said classes intended for 30 students now have up to 45 students each. Even those class sizes don't accommodate everyone who wants in, she said.

Immigrants who take English-language classes at East County's community colleges usually wait a year so they are eligible for the California resident fee of \$26 per unit instead of the international student fee of \$190 per unit.

Grossmont College in El Cajon offered three English-language classes for about 75 students this semester but hasn't been able to add more classes because of state budget cuts, said department chairman Chuck Passentino.

"They really need the help, and we can't provide it," Passentino said. "That's what's killing me."

Cuyamaca College provides English-language classes for about 800 students — triple the number of two years ago, said Muñoz, the coordinator. To serve students who need basic instruction, the college has canceled more advanced classes on using English in the workplace and on computer vocabulary, she said.

Muñoz said some students who can't get into English as a Second Language classes are signing up for freshman English, which isn't intended for students unfamiliar with the language.

"They'll be in the class and they won't understand a single word," Muñoz said. "They did that in desperation because they couldn't get in the (English as a Second Language) classes."

Guillermo Colls, an ESL instructor at Cuyamaca College, said 27 of 29 students registered for his reading class are from Iraq. An additional 40 students are on a waiting list for the twice-weekly classes.

One of his students, 52-year-old Basim Shroin of El Cajon, said he worked as a welder in Iraq but hasn't been able to find work in San Diego County. Shroin needs to take the class to keep his welfare benefits, but he said that's not the main reason he's there.

"I came here to study, not just for the hours," Shroin said.

Colls read a textbook passage to the class, stopping to discuss vocabulary words that included "functional," "adjustable" and "ergonomic." He told the students an "efficient" worker was careful and didn't make errors.

"I give you the easiest meaning possible and you get the overall idea," Colls said.

In addition to classes offered by high schools and colleges, some students are taking classes wherever they can find them. License To Freedom, an El Cajon nonprofit group that aids Iraqis, has about 100 students in an English-language class that has grown from 30 students a year ago. Dilkhwaz Ahmed, an Iraqi immigrant who runs the group, said many students are taking classes at several locations to fulfill their requirements for financial assistance.

"Welfare is putting too much pressure on them," Ahmed said. "They want to go to class, but they can't find any."

A group of East County residents has arranged to offer training for volunteers who want to teach English to immigrants. The program is part of a project by business leaders and the San Diego East County Chamber of Commerce to provide more interpreters for immigrants at clinics and hospitals.

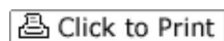
Debra Palmer, a nurse practitioner at an El Cajon clinic, said new arrivals have difficulties communicating with health care workers.

"These people are going without services because there's nobody there to advocate," Palmer said.

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<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/2010/apr/12/english-classes-cant-meet-demand>



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